UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
RELIGION DEPARTMENT &
PROGRAM IN AMERICAN STUDIES

Course Revision Proposal
Witchcraft & Its Interpreters (RELG 273)

1. Course number: Religion 273

2. Full course title: “Witchcraft & Its Interpreters”

3. Catalog description: “Interdisciplinary exploration of witchcraft, popular magic, and demonic possession in early modern England and British North America based on original legal records and other primary sources. Special attention given to the Salem Witch-hunt and the historical methods employed by contemporary scholars.”

4. Prerequisites: none

5. Hours of credit: 1 unit

6. Estimate of student enrollment: 19

7. By whom and when the course will be offered: Dr. Douglas L. Winiarski, Department of Religion; offered in alternate years (fall semester)

8. Staffing implications: There are no anticipated staffing issues associated with this course.

9. Library resources: Most relevant texts that I have used in the more advanced iterations of this course are available in published form at Boatwright Library, through subscription databases such as JSTOR and ProjectMuse, or at “Witchcraft in Salem Village” — a full text website sponsored by the Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia. Students would benefit from having access to multiple copies of the recently published Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt, Bernard Rosenthal, et al., eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

10. Relation to existing courses and curricula: RELG 273 is a revised version of an advanced research seminar that I have taught for nearly a decade (RELG 373). I have redesigned the seminar as a lower-division field-of-study course. It is my hope that offering the course at the 200-level will help to ensure enrollments and attract more students to the Religion major.

11. Indication of approval by department or program: February 10, 2010.
12. **Purpose and rationale for the course**: “Witchcraft and Its Interpreters” is designed to help students develop basic analytical skills through the interdisciplinary investigation of witchcraft, popular magic, demonic possession, and allied occult phenomena in early modern England and British North America. Class participants work with a wide variety of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century primary texts, including church, court, probate, and town records; sermons and theological treatises; and personal diaries, autobiographies, and letters. They also explore secondary literature, learning in the process how professional scholars construct interpretations of early modern conceptions of the supernatural. Bi-weekly class discussions emphasize different methodological approaches drawn from the fields of religion, history, gender studies, sociology, and psychology. The written assignments for the course provide opportunities for students to practice these methods in focused papers relating to witchcraft incidents not covered in our classroom discussions.

13. **Brief outline of the course** (based on Fall 2008 iteration of RELG 373):

- Week 1: Introduction to the Course/Witches of the Atlantic World
- Week 2: The Usual Suspects/Collective Biography
- Week 3: Social Dimensions of Witchcraft
- Week 4: Witchcraft & Gender
- Week 5: Magic, Wonders & Popular Culture
- Week 6: Demonic Possession & Psychohistory
- Week 7: Magic & Popular Religion
- Week 8: Mid-Term Case Analysis Paper
- Week 9: Introduction to the Salem Witch-Hunt
- Week 10: Social History & the Salem Witch-Hunt
- Week 11: Racial Outsiders & the Making of a Witch-Hunt
- Week 12: Ministers & Magistrates Debating Spectral Evidence
- Week 13: Gender, Language & the Andover Confessions
- Week 14: Putting the Pieces Together

**Historical Studies Methods & Rationale**

The unusual and fascinating subject matter of early modern witchcraft trials and allied occult phenomena, which has generated a theoretically sophisticated historiography and numerous anthologies of edited primary texts, make this course an ideal candidate for FSHT credit. RELG 273 challenges students to interpret witchcraft, popular magic, and demonic possession in the early modern Atlantic world through a series of methodological frames and a variety of primary texts.

The FSHT component of RELG 273 may be divided into four interrelated learning objectives:

- Analyzing different types of seventeenth-century texts, including church, court, probate, tax, and town records; sermons and theological treatises; and personal diaries, autobiographies, and letters.
• Identifying the contextual approaches employed by scholars who study early modern Anglo-American witchcraft incidents and allied occult phenomena: social history, legal history, gender theory, psychohistory, intellectual history, popular culture studies, and race and ethnicity studies.

• Employing these frames to form independent interpretations. The course paper assignments provide opportunities for students to apply different methodological approaches to unfamiliar, but well documented cases of witchcraft.

• Emphasizing historical interpretation over historical causation. I encourage students to think about how witchcraft, popular magic, and demonic possession “made sense” to people in seventeenth-century England and British North America (rather than what caused the Salem Witch-Hunt) and why occult lore frequently provided a compelling cultural lens throughout which they understood misfortune, pain, illness, and other temporal afflictions.